



# What Can Teacher Education Programs Do to Prepare Teachers to Teach High-Achieving Culturally Diverse Male Students?



by H. Richard Milner, F. Blake Tenore, and Judson Laughter

Never before have public school teachers in the United States been faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of so many culturally diverse learners. The teaching force in the U.S. is increasingly White, monolingual, middle class, and female, whereas the student population is increasingly diverse.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we discuss what teacher education programs can do to prepare teachers to teach high-achieving culturally diverse male students. It is important to note that we are not claiming that the strategies and suggestions discussed in this article will automatically mean that teachers will be successful teachers of high-achieving culturally diverse male students. We are suggesting that special attention needs to be placed on the educational experiences of high-achieving Black male students. Having a discussion about high-achieving students may seem insignificant—that is, if the students are high achieving why should we be concerned about them? We believe that diverse male learners, and especially high achievers, are often left out of policies and practices in teacher education programs that ultimately could contribute to what Ford (1996) called these students' underachievement.

We recognize that the gifted education referral process is complex and that teachers often only play a small role in the identification and referral of students into gifted education. Still, teachers often have *some* input into the referral process, and they need to be prepared (develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary) to identify these students, particularly culturally diverse male students. Teacher education programs can take on the task of providing opportunities for teachers to see through their own preconceived notions of giftedness and empower teachers to develop a mindset such that they can increase the representation of culturally diverse male high-achieving students in gifted education (Rohrer, 1995).

Our suggestions for teacher education programs are grounded in our research, understanding, and conceptualizations of high-achieving students (e.g., Milner, 2002), culturally diverse male high achievers (Milner & Ford,

2007; Tenore & Milner, 2006), practicing and preservice teachers, as well as teacher education (Ford & Milner, 2005). Each of us works in some capacity with teachers: one of us (Milner) teaches a required undergraduate course in the teacher education program and the other two (Tenore and Laughter) supervise student teachers in their practicum and student teaching experiences. Moreover, each of us has taught high-achieving students in pre-K–12 classrooms, some of whom were culturally diverse. We use this knowledge to discuss what we believe are some important features of teacher education programs that take high-achieving culturally diverse males into serious consideration.

By high achieving, we mean students who put forth the highest levels of effort to perform, achieve, and learn in their academics, extracurricular activities (e.g., football, band, social clubs), and other school/academic related areas. Such students typically have grade point averages above (and often well above) a 3.0 on a 4.0 scale and *may or may not* be in gifted education programs. These students may have the greatest potential to be identified, placed, and retained into gifted education programs. In a sense, we are suggesting that one way to increase the representation of culturally diverse male students taking advantage of gifted education is to nurture and support all students and especially these students. To do so, teachers develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, and perspectives necessary to identify and nurture the talent that high-achieving culturally diverse males possess. Paying closer attention to these students could circumvent the dismal representation of these students in gifted education. We are troubled with and concerned about this underrepresentation and agree with Ford (2006) when she wrote: “Sadly, I have

seen little progress relative to demographic changes—Black and Hispanic students continue to be as under-represented in gifted programs today as they were 20 years ago” (p. 2).

Clearly, teacher education courses and experiences are essential to the knowledge development, conceptual understanding, and practice of teachers in classrooms with culturally diverse students. Teachers' knowledge is enhanced, and their beliefs and conceptions about teaching are influenced by teacher education. Thus, the question is: What can teacher education programs do to prepare teachers to teach culturally diverse high-achieving male students?

### What Teacher Education Can Do

We discuss two general areas where teacher education can increase the knowledge and improve the practice of teachers, particularly where culturally diverse high-achieving male students are concerned: (a) teacher education classroom experiences and (b) guided field-based experiences. In Table 1, we attempt to outline some of the most important features of teacher education in the preparation of teachers for high-achieving culturally diverse male students. The remainder of this section elaborates on the points shared in the figure.

*Teacher education programs engage teachers in readings that showcase high-achieving culturally diverse students.* Teachers need to read and learn about high-achieving culturally diverse males. Because so much of what teachers have been exposed to (in the media, from their parents/families) focuses on culturally diverse groups as remedial or unreachable, it is necessary for teachers to experience literature that points to the expertise—the strengths—that

**Table 1**  
**Important Features in the Preparation of Teachers**

**Teacher Education Classroom Experiences**

- Engage teachers in readings that showcase high-achieving culturally diverse male students. For example, *A Hope in the Unseen* (Suskind, 1998).
- Offer core courses that focus on high-achieving aspects of diversity. Teach student teachers to understand their own and others' deficit thinking.
- Provide access to counternarratives and instruct teachers in using these counternarratives in their own classrooms. For example, *Maniac McGee* (Spinelli, 1990) and *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1947).
- Instruct teachers in how to locate and use literature from a variety of sources in their own classrooms (e.g., using rap lyrics).

**Teacher Education Field-Based Experiences**

- Field-based experiences must contain guided reflection and discussion so as not to reinforce existing stereotypes.
- Field-based experiences can explode existing notions of "high achieving" and "giftedness."
- Students can engage in community-investigation/intercultural projects where they are the "other."

many culturally diverse males bring into the classroom. For many teachers, they have not seen these students in a positive light.

For instance, Milner has used Suskind's (1998) *A Hope in the Unseen* with teachers in teacher education courses. Overwhelmingly, the teachers in the courses report deeper understanding about high-achieving African American males. As is the case with Cedric, the main character in Suskind's book, African American students find themselves dealing with situations far beyond their control (lack of resources, institutional racism, and inequity for instance)—yet, they still persevere *and* achieve. Teachers often admit that they do not realize there are students like Cedric in urban contexts. They are operating from perspectives that have been one-sided. Much of what they have come to understand about schools like Ballou, the urban high school that Cedric attends, is the negative; the teachers come to understand quite well what the students do not have instead of what they actually have. They are operating from deficit

perspectives (Ford, 1996). Ford and Grantham (2003) maintained that

... the under-representation of diverse students in gifted education is primarily a function of educators holding a deficit perspective about diverse students. Deficit thinking exists when educators hold negative, stereotypic and counterproductive views about culturally diverse students and lower their expectations of these students accordingly. (p. 217)

Deficit thoughts and beliefs may cause teachers to lower their expectations for culturally diverse male students because teachers have preconceived notions about these students' potential and ability. Thus, it is important for teachers to develop what Ford and Grantham (2003) called dynamic thinking when working with culturally diverse male students. In other words, the researchers stressed the necessity of teachers changing their negative thinking about culturally

diverse students and considering the strengths of the students.

Courses are needed that focus on various aspects of student and teacher diversity, not just courses that highlight all the negatives and struggles. Further, diversity courses and seminars do not need to be perceived as "add on" courses—classes in the margins of learning and that do not seem coherent or very important to the overall mission and thrust of the teacher education program. Issues of diversity need to emerge in the methods and content-area courses as well. Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, and Middleton (1999) wrote the following where similar issues emerged in their study:

As instructors of one class in a large, complex program, we realize we can go only so far on our own. Our foundations course [focused on diversity and multiculturalism] is marginalized from the curriculum and methods courses that students consider most important. If preservice teachers are to become more efficacious in teaching culturally diverse students and preparing all students to live in a democratic, multicultural society, we must work together as a program toward these ends. (p. 363)

Accordingly, courses are needed that provide teachers with access to readings that can serve as counternarratives (Parker, 1998) to the pervasive discourses and realities that they have experienced and come to know and understand.

Indeed, counternarratives have made some headway in infiltrating pre-K–12 classrooms (e.g., Ellison's [1947] *Invisible Man* or Spinelli's [1990] *Maniac McGee*), offering stories that run against notions of genre and



character. However, teacher education programs should use their methods courses to instruct teachers in how to use these texts and in how to uncover and include their own alternative texts that demonstrate learning and achievement by culturally diverse male characters and artists in the texts. Direct connections then need to be made to students in the pre-K–12 classroom. For example, courses in adolescent literature should move beyond established texts and include some of the recent work that explicitly addresses issues of racism, privilege, stereotyping, and achievement (see, for example, Rogers & Christian, in press) through meaningful literature.

White teachers attempting to teach diverse students often rely on the texts they used in their own education. If teaching poetry, for example, a White teacher may use Shakespeare, Pope, and Eliot, not recognizing that the same lessons, constructs, conventions, and terms could be taught using song lyrics, rap music, or poetry by culturally and ethnically diverse writers. Teacher education programs must provide teachers with the tools and the permission to step outside the canon<sup>2</sup> and include literature that models high achievement from culturally diverse writers. Clearly, one way to equip teachers with these tools is by the modeling that teacher educators provide in their courses in teacher education.

Carol Lee (2006) has demonstrated how White poetry teachers have just as much trouble dissecting Black rap lyrics as their Black students have with White poetry. Teaching these terms and processes in a meaningful way means finding a discourse in which both the students and the teacher are comfortable. Because teacher education programs cannot predict where their student teachers will end up once they have completed their teacher education program, they must prepare

them with a set of tools that can be adapted and used effectively in any situation or context. Although dismissed by some in society, there are rap artists who demonstrate a high-level of poetic achievement and could be quite appropriate for the public school classroom (e.g., Kanye West or the Black Eyed Peas) and should be recognized as such. There exists a hidden wealth of texts modeling high achievement by culturally diverse writers and artists, and a wealth of suggestions can emerge from the teacher education students and the pre-K–12 students. Continuing to exclusively use the canon can teach high-achieving males that they must be White in order to be successful, which is not the case. In short, information the students do not receive and experience in the curriculum—what Eisner (1994) called the null curriculum—also is a learning opportunity for the students. The students are learning that some materials, experiences, perspectives, worldviews, and information are not important or central to the curriculum and instruction.

In addition to classroom courses that expose teachers to written texts with a wide range of literary expertise by culturally diverse individuals, teacher education programs also can provide practicum and student teaching experiences that place teachers in contexts that allow them to work with high-achieving culturally diverse male students.

*Teachers need guided field experiences with high-achieving culturally diverse male students.* Mentor/cooperating teachers need to be identified who believe in and understand high-achieving culturally diverse students. Often, cooperating teachers understand and are attentive to the achievement level of the student but do not consider his or her cultural and ethnic background and experiences. These

teachers are color and culture-blind (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005) to the detriment of their students. For instance, when teachers do not “see color or culture,” or at least acknowledge that race and culture matter, there may be “ignored discriminatory institutional practices toward students of color such as higher suspension rates for African American males” (Johnson, 2002, p. 154) in conjunction with students of color being referred to special education and lower tracked courses and rarely placed into gifted education. Banks (2001) explained that

a statement such as ‘I don’t see color’ reveals a privileged position that refuses to legitimize racial identifications that are very important to people of color and that are often used to justify inaction and perpetuation of the status quo. (p. 12)

To be clear, we are suggesting that the overreferral of culturally diverse students into special education and the underreferral of culturally diverse students into gifted education are actions that maintain and perpetuate the status quo.

Once cooperating and mentor teachers are identified to work with student/practicing teachers, all involved need to be guided in reflection about what is actually occurring with the students socially, academically, politically, emotionally, and affectively. In other words, placement or field experiences without structured debriefing and discussion about what is actually occurring in the context and why it can be disadvantageous and, frankly, dangerous. It is important for field experiences with high-achieving culturally diverse males to be guided with instruction and discussion with professors of teacher education in order to help the teachers

come to terms with their own biases, perceptions, and issues. However, an assumption cannot be made that professors or instructors of teacher education have the knowledge and skills to understand culturally diverse high-achieving students. Merryfield (2000) questioned whether teacher educators possessed what was necessary to teach for equity when many had not “had even the minimal kind of experiences with diverse cultures or the basic understandings of inequities . . .” (p. 430). She wondered whether teacher educators were actually equipped (themselves) to provide the intellectual space necessary to assist and empower teachers to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions to teach culturally diverse pre-K–12 students. Consequently, all those involved, teacher educators and teacher education students, must consistently work to understand and gain knowledge about high-achieving culturally diverse male students.

Field experiences with high-achieving culturally diverse males can reinforce stereotypes that teachers have had about various groups of students for several years. It is through the guided reflection and discussion that stereotypes can be problematized and challenged. Still, the instruction and guided experiences along with the field-based experiences can really be important in helping teachers understand their evolving practices and conceptions of teaching with high-achieving culturally diverse students.

In addition, not only is the teaching force predominantly and increasingly White, middle-class, and monolingual, they arrive in teacher preparation programs with few intercultural experiences (Melnick & Zeichner, 1995). As a result of their monocultural lives and experiences, teachers likely have never been asked to see the world from any perspective other than their own and

that of the White experience in which they have lived and worked their entire lives. Conceptions and definitions of “high achievement” and “giftedness” are cultural products that develop out of one’s own experiences as a learner in schools built upon traditional (i.e., White) ideas of academic and intellectual success. Typically, students are deemed “gifted” based upon GPA, standardized test scores, teacher recommendations, or combinations of the three. As a consequence of the narrow definition and myopic lens through which schools and teachers seek “giftedness,” culturally diverse high-achieving male students often are left out and end up with learning opportunities that are inappropriate for their abilities. Teacher education programs can, by encouraging intercultural experiences for their students, help preservice teachers expand their notions of what it means to be gifted. Teacher education programs could provide study abroad experiences and other intercultural experiences to assist teachers in developing the knowledge and understanding of individuals different from themselves. More locally, teacher education programs can require teachers to have at least one field experience in an urban site or a highly diverse learning context.

Beyond structured field experiences that are built into the teacher education program, classroom experiences could combine literature with field-related experiences. For instance, students can identify and spend significant time with a cultural group different from their own. Students may choose an ethnic or racial group with whom to become acquainted, or they may choose a specific community of people brought together by a common characteristic that encompasses diverse races and ethnicities. The primary goal is for the student to engage in an experience in which he or

she is the “other.” During time spent with the group, students gather data through observation and interviews that demonstrate what the customs, traditions, values, and beliefs of the group are, who the leaders are, how they become leaders, and what characteristics or abilities seem to be most respected among the group members. Students should examine commonalities and differences with an eye toward broadening their conceptions of what it means to be high achieving, gifted and, of course, culturally diverse.

By spending time with a different cultural group through intercultural experiences, teachers give themselves an opportunity to understand what a student’s home cultural values are, what an individual may be held in high esteem for doing or saying, and how that may be very different from the cultural values espoused in the classroom. Acquaintance with another culture by this process is a step toward lessening deficit thinking about high-achieving culturally diverse male students and toward learning to value their assets in the classroom as much as they are valued in their homes and communities. It is important for the teachers in these intercultural experiences to act as learners and researchers, in the context to build and broaden their knowledge.

## Summary

Teachers in public schools have 13 years to teach, as well as a reach, a wide range of students, and teacher education has far less time. What teachers do in those 13 years has a profound influence on students, and what teacher education does can meaningfully influence teachers’ and students’ opportunities to learn in pre-K–12. It is, in this regard, unreasonable for teacher education not to place students in pre-K–12 at the cen-

ter of its programs. Our students have changed—so must the policies and practices in teacher education.

This discussion is not meant to be presented as *the* way to prepare teachers to teach high-achieving culturally diverse male students. It is meant to serve as *a* way to start thinking about addressing this group of students in our teacher education programs. We urge teacher education programs to incorporate these strategies, philosophies, and ideas into their teacher education programs to possibly benefit the many culturally diverse male students who are overlooked, underserved, and underrepresented in gifted programs across the nation. Doing business as usual is not the answer. In order for us to experience change, new policies, practices, and procedures need to be in place. Besides, high-achieving culturally diverse male students—like all students—deserve learning opportunities and experiences that bring out the very best in them. **GCT**

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> We understand that there is a great deal of diversity within and among people from every racial and ethnic background, even among White people. We also understand and find it problematic that White people are considered to be the “norm” by which all others are judged, evaluated, and compared. However, because of limited space available in this article and for the purposes of this article, we are defining culturally diverse high achievers as students who classify themselves as African American, Latino/a, and Hispanic.

<sup>2</sup> By canon, we mean the texts used in the classroom without critical questioning by teachers, administration, students, or parents. For example, we do not propose the removal of

Shakespeare from all classrooms; however, we do not propose the use of Shakespeare simply because society has granted his work privilege over others.

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